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Fear and Loathing: On The Campaign Trail '72

Dr. Hunter S. Thompson



Dr. Thompson at Work

The ghost of Kennedy's Past hangs so heavy on this dreary presidential campaign that even the most cynical journalistic veterans of the Jack & Bobby campaigns are beginning to resent it out loud. A few days ago in Jacksonville, creeping through the early morning traffic between the Hilton Hotel and the railroad depot, I was slumped in my seat feeling half-alive and staring morosely at the front page of the *Jacksonville Times-Union* when I caught a few flashes of a conversation from behind my right ear:

" . . . getting a little tired of this goddamn ersatz Kennedy campaign . . . now they have Rosey Grier singing 'Let the Sun Shine In' for us.... It seems like they'd be embarrassed ..."

We were going down to the depot to get aboard the "Sunshine Special," Ed Muskie's chartered train that was about to chug off on a run from Jacksonville to Miami -- the whole length of Florida -- for a series of "whistle-stop" speeches in towns like Deland, Winterhaven, and Sebring.

One of Muskie's Senate aids had told me, as we waited on a downtown street-corner for the candidate's motorcade to catch up with the press bus, that "nobody has done one of these whistle-stop tours since Harry Truman in 1948."

Was he kidding? I looked to be sure, but his face was dead serious.

"Well . . ." he said.

"Funny you'd say that . . . because I just heard some people on the bus talking about Bobby Kennedy's campaign trains in Indiana and California in 1968." I smiled pleasantly. "They even wrote a song about it: Don't tell me you never heard 'The Ruthless Cannonball'?"

The Muskie man shook his head, not looking at me -- staring intently down the street as if he'd suddenly picked up the first distant vibrations from Big Ed's black Cadillac bearing down on us. I looked, but the only vehicle in sight was a rusty pickup truck from "Larry's Plumbing and Welding." It was idling at the stoplight: The driver was wearing a yellow plastic hard hat and nipping at a can of Schlitz. He glanced curiously at the big red/white/blue draped Muskie bus, then roared past us when the light changed to green. On the rear window of the cab was a small American flag decal, and a strip on the rear bumper said "President Wallace. . . ."

The whistle-stops were uneventful until his noon arrival in Miami, where Yippie

activist Jerry Rubin and another man heckled and interrupted him repeatedly. The Senator at one point tried to answer Rubin's charges that he had once been a hawk on (Vietnam) war measures. He acknowledged that he had made a mistake, as did many other senators in those times, but Rubin did not let him finish. "Muskie ultimately wound up scolding Rubin and fellow heckler Peter Sheridan, who had boarded the train in West Palm Beach with press credentials apparently obtained from Rolling Stone's Washington correspondent, Dr. Hunter S. Thompson."

Miami Herald, 2/20/72

This incident has haunted me ever since it smacked me in the eyes one peaceful Sunday morning a few weeks ago as I sat on the balmy screened porch of the National Affairs Suite here in the Royal Biscayne Hotel. I was slicing up grapefruit and sipping a pot of coffee while perusing the political page of the *Herald* when I suddenly saw my name in the middle of a story on Ed Muskie's "Sunshine Special" campaign train from Jacksonville to Miami.

Several quick phone calls confirmed that something ugly had happened on that train, and that I was being blamed for it. A New York reporter assigned to the Muskie camp warned me to "stay clear of this place . . . they're really hot about it. They've pulled your pass for good."

"Wonderful," I said. "That's one more bummer that I have an excuse to avoid: But what happened? Why do they blame me?"

"Jesus Christ!" he said. "That crazy sonofabitch got on the train wearing your press badge and went completely crazy. He drank about ten martinis before the train even got moving, then he started abusing people. He cornered some poor bastard from one of the Washington papers and called him a Greasy Faggot and a Communist Buttfucker . . . then he started pushing him around and saying he was going to throw him off the train at the next bridge . . . we couldn't believe it was happening. He scared one of the network TV guys so bad that he locked himself in a water-closet for the rest of the trip."

"Jesus, I hate to hear this," I said. "But nobody really thought it was me, did they?"

"Hell, yes, they did," he replied. "The only people on the train who even know what you look like were me and ----." (He mentioned several reporters whose names need not be listed here.) "But everybody else just looked at that ID badge he was wearing and pretty soon the word was all the way back to Muskie's car that some thug named Thompson from a thing called *Rolling Stone* was tearing the train apart. They were going to send Rosey Grier up to deal with you, but Dick Stewart [Muskie's press secretary] said it wouldn't look good to have a three hundred pound bodyguard beating up journalists on the campaign train."

"That's typical Muskie staff-thinking," I said. "They've done everything else wrong; why balk at stomping a reporter?"

He laughed. "Actually," he said. "the rumor was that you'd eaten a lot of LSD and gone wild -- that you couldn't control yourself."

"What do you mean me?" I said. "I wasn't even on that goddamn train. The Muskie people deliberately didn't wake me up in West Palm Beach. They didn't like my attitude from the day

before. My friend from the University of Florida newspaper said he heard them talking about it down in the lobby when they were checking off the press list and waking up all the others."

"Yeah, I heard some of that talk," he said. "Somebody said you seemed very negative."

"I was," I said. "That was one of the most degrading political experiences I've ever been subjected to." "That's what the Muskie people said about your friend," he replied. "Abusing reporters is one thing -- hell, we're all used to that -- but about halfway to Miami I saw him reach over the bar and grab a whole bottle of gin off the rack. Then he began wandering from car to car, drinking out of the bottle and getting after those poor goddamn girls. That's when it really got bad."

"What girls?" I said.

"The ones in those little red, white, and blue hotpants outfits," he replied. "All those so-called 'Muskie volunteers' from Jacksonville Junior College, or whatever... ."

"You mean the barmaids? The ones with the straw boaters?"

"Yeah," he said. "The cheerleaders. Well, they went all to goddamn pieces when your friend started manhandling them. Every time he'd come into a car the girls would run out the door at the other end. But every once in a while he'd catch one by an arm or a leg and start yelling stuff like 'Now I gotcha, you little beauty! Come on over here and sit on poppa's face!'"

"Jesus!" I said. "Why didn't they just put him off the train?"

"How? You don't stop a chartered Amtrak train on a main line just because of a drunken passenger. What if Muskie had ordered an emergency stop and we'd been rammed by a freight train? No presidential candidate would risk a thing like that." I could see the headlines in every paper from Key West to Seattle:

**Muskie Campaign Train Collision Kills 34;
Demo Candidate Blames "Crazy Journalist"**

"Anyway," he said. "we were running late for that big rally at the station in Miami -- so the Muskie guys figured it was better to just endure the crazy sonofabitch, rather than cause a violent scene on a train full of bored reporters. Christ. The train was loathed with network TV crews, all of them bitching about how Muskie wasn't doing anything worth putting on the air...." He laughed. "Hell, yes we all would have loved a big brawl on the train. Personally, I was bored stupid. I didn't get a quote worth filing out of the whole trip." He laughed again. "Actually, Muskie *deserved* that guy. He was a goddamn nightmare to be trapped on a train with, but at least he wasn't *dull*. Nobody was dozing off like they did on Friday. Hell, there was no way to get away from that brute! All you could do was keep moving and hope he wouldn't get hold of you."

Both the *Washington Star* and *Women's Wear Daily* reported essentially the same tale: A genuinely savage person had boarded the train in West Palm Beach, using a fraudulent press pass, then ran amok in the lounge car -- getting in "several fist-fights" and finally "heckling the Senator unmercifully" when the train pulled into Miami and Muskie went out on the caboose platform to deliver what was supposed to have been the climactic speech of his triumphant whistle-stop tour.

It was at this point -- according to press reports both published and otherwise -- that my alleged friend, calling himself "Peter Sheridan," cranked up his act to a level that caused Senator Muskie

to "cut short his remarks."

When the "Sunshine Special" pulled into the station at Miami, "Sheridan" reeled off the train and took a position on the tracks just below Muskie's caboose platform, where he spent the next half hour causing the Senator a hellish amount of grief -- along with Jerry Rubin, who also showed up at the station to ask Muskie what had caused him to change his mind about supporting the War in Vietnam. Rubin had been in Miami for several weeks, making frequent appearances on local TV to warn that "Ten Thousand naked hippies" would be among those attending the Democratic National Convention at Miami Beach in July. "We will march to the Convention Center," he announced, "but there will be no violence -- at least not by us." To questions regarding his presence in Florida, Rubin said he "decided to move down here, because of the climate," and that he was also registered to vote in Florida -- as a Republican. Contrary to the rancid suspicions of the Muskie staff people, Sheridan didn't even recognize Rubin and I hadn't seen him since the Counter Inaugural Ball which ran opposite Nixon's inauguration in 1969. When Rubin showed up at the train station that Saturday afternoon to hassle Muskie, the Senator from Maine was apparently the only person in the crowd (except Sheridan) who didn't know who he was. His first response to Rubin's heckling was, "Shut up, young man -- I'm talking."

"You're not a damn bit different from Nixon," Rubin shouted back . . .

. . . And it was at this point, according to compiled press reports and a first-hand account by Monte Chitty of the University of Florida *Alligator*, that Muskie seemed to lose his balance and fall back from the rail. . . .

Not much has been written about The Ibogaine Effect as a serious factor in the Presidential Campaign, but toward the end of the Wisconsin primary race -- about a week before the vote -- word leaked out that some of Muskie's top advisors had called in a Brazilian doctor who was said to be treating the candidate with "some kind of strange drug" that nobody in the press corps had ever heard of.

It had been common knowledge for many weeks that Humphrey was using an exotic brand of speed known as *Wallot* . . . and it had long been whispered that Muskie was into something very heavy, but it was hard to take the talk seriously until I heard about the appearance of a mysterious Brazilian doctor. That was the key.

I immediately recognized The Ibogaine Effect -- from Muskie's tearful breakdown on the flatbed truck in New Hampshire, the delusions and altered thinking that characterized his campaign in Florida, and finally the condition of "total rage" that gripped him in Wisconsin.

There was no doubt about it: The Man from Maine had turned to massive doses of Ibogaine as a last resort. The only remaining question was "when did he start?" But nobody could answer this one, and I was not able to press the candidate himself for an answer because I was permanently barred from the Muskie campaign after that incident on the "Sunshine Special" in Florida . . . and that scene makes far more sense now than it did at the time. Muskie has always



taken pride in his ability to deal with hecklers; he has frequently challenged them, calling them up to the stage in front of big crowds and then forcing the poor bastards to debate with him in a blaze of TV lights.

Big Ed discussed the marijuana question for the dope-smoking students in Madison, Wisconsin, moments before refusing to take a toké himself. Later in the campaign, however, it was reported that Senator Muskie was a known user of a powerful drug called Ibogaine.

But there was none of that in Florida. When the Boohoo began grabbing at his legs and screaming for more gin, Big Ed went all to pieces . . . which gave rise to speculation. among reporters familiar with his campaign style in '68 and '70, that Muskie was not himself. It was noted, among other things, that he had developed a tendency to roll his eyes wildly during TV interviews, that his thought patterns had become strangely fragmented, and that not even his closest advisors could predict when he might suddenly spiral off into babbling rages, or neocomatose funks.

In retrospect, however, it is easy to see why Muskie fell apart on that caboose platform in the Miami train station. There he was -- far gone in a bad Ibogaine frenzy -- suddenly shoved out in a rainstorm to face a sullen crowd and some kind of snarling lunatic going for his legs while he tried to explain why he was "the only Democrat who can beat Nixon."

It is entirely conceivable -- given the known effects of Ibogaine -- that Muskie's brain was almost paralyzed by hallucinations at the time; that he looked out at that crowd and saw gila monsters instead of people, and that his mind snapped completely when he felt something large and apparently vicious clawing at his legs. We can only speculate on this, because those in a position to know have flatly refused to comment on rumors concerning the Senator's disastrous experiments with Ibogaine. I tried to find the Brazilian doctor on election night in Milwaukee, but by the time the polls closed he was long gone. One of the hired bimbos in Milwaukee's Holiday Inn headquarters said a man with fresh welts on his head had been dragged out the side door and put on a bus to Chicago, but we were never able to confirm this. . . .

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